

1 JUN 1972

I. F. Stone Reports:

STATINTL

STATINTL

Nixon's War Gamble and Why It Won't Work

The Washington dispatch which follows had to be written and put into type before Nixon's speech the night of May 8, announcing his decision to mine North Vietnam's harbors and to smash its rail and road connections with China. But the disclosures to which the article calls attention provide the explanation of Nixon's long-range strategy, its weakness and its risks.

It is characteristic of Nixon's secretiveness that National Security Study Memorandum No. 1—which is discussed and partly reprinted below—though intended in 1969, to lay the groundwork for his policies on Vietnam, nowhere asked the advice of intelligence agencies and the bureaucracy, military and civilian, on the very policy of "Vietnamization" he adopted. But at two points in their responses, there were warnings against US troop withdrawal and doubts expressed about ARVN's ability to stand alone. Four military agencies (US MACV, CINCPAC, JCS, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense) warned against "a too hasty withdrawal of US forces." The CIA went further and said progress "has been slow, fragile and evolutionary," adding quietly, "It is difficult to see how the US can largely disengage over the next few years without jeopardizing this."

It is now clear that Nixon took the gamble on Vietnamization in the hope that if this failed, a bigger gamble would succeed. The bigger gamble, as the reader will see, was either to buy off Moscow and Peking or, if that didn't work, to use the threat of a nuclear confrontation to make them stand by while we destroyed North Vietnam from the air. In other words, if his gamble on South Vietnam's future failed, he was and is prepared to gamble America's future and the world's. This is the reality behind Nixon's proclaimed search for "a generation of peace."

The mining of North Vietnam's ports and the decision to blockade it by sea and air is potentially the gravest decision ever taken by an American President for it sets off a slow fuse

that could ignite World War III. A gamble of such magnitude, taken by one man without any real consultation with other branches of government, can only be described as an act of dictatorship and war. Nixon—one must assume—is as ready for the domestic as for the world consequences. The martial law imposed in Saigon may be a foretaste of the repression to be expected at home if the situation deteriorates.

In the literally terrible calculus of events, as I write a few hours after the deadline passed in Haiphong harbor, the question is whether Moscow and Peking will act with the same primitive irrationality that Nixon has, putting prestige, face, and *machismo* ahead of civilization's survival, or whether their leadership will take the blow at whatever cost to their own political future, hoping that Hanoi's armies will shortly have achieved their aim, which clearly is not territory but the destruction of Saigon's will to resist and an end of the Thieu regime. But even if the crisis is thereby resolved "peacefully" at the expense of the Vietnamese people North and South, it is difficult to see a successful summit, a SALT agreement as a sequel. It is easier to see a new era of heightened suspicion, tension, cold war, and escalating arms race.

In the tense moments at the White House just before press time Nixon was doing his best to pantomime a victory, calling in the photographers and giving them sixty feet of film instead of the usual forty to record a visit with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin and Soviet Trade Minister Patolichev. "The atmosphere of the session," said the pool report in the press room, "was extremely amiable, cordial, and pleasant. There were lots of smiles all around and the President seemed particularly buoyant." Dobrynin looked a bit uneasy, but Patolichev, when asked later whether the summit was still on, replied "Was there ever any doubt?"

Was this cheerful idiocy merely marking time while waiting for the Kremlin to make up its collective mind or would we see an *opéra bouffe* cave-in instead of an apocalypse? If brinkmanship paid off, what new hair-raisers lie ahead? Just after dawn this morning at the Capitol vigil under a cloudless blue sky as the mines were activated 9,000 miles away, one listened to the clichés with which men comfort themselves in crisis and could only hope that by some miracle the American people might assert themselves and force a change of course.

Catch the Falling Flag
by Richard J. Whalen.
Houghton Mifflin, 308 pp., \$6.95

National Security Study
Memorandum No. 1:
The Situation in Vietnam
Anonymous Xerox Publication,
548 pp.

I. F. Stone

Four years ago Richard Nixon was just where he is now on Vietnam, i.e., on the brink of a wider conflict. He didn't think the war could be won, but didn't want to lose "leverage" by saying so in public. His one hope, his "secret plan" for "an honorable peace," i.e., for snatching political victory from military defeat, was to shut off Haiphong and bring about a confrontation with the Soviet Union. This is exactly where he—and we—are today. After all the years of costly losses, all he offers is a bigger gamble.

Catch the Falling Flag, Richard J. Whalen's memoir of his service as a speech writer for Nixon in the 1968 campaign, could not have appeared at a better moment. It provides the full text of the speech Nixon was about to give on his own plan to end the war when Johnson announced on March 31 that he would not run again. Two days before, conferring with his speech writers, Nixon startled them by an extraordinarily—and uncharacteristically—candid remark. "I've come to the conclusion," Whalen quotes him as saying, "that there's no way to win the war. But we can't say that, of course. We can only say the opposite, just to keep some degree of bargaining leverage."